

Dáil Reform Note

Background

The Programme for Government outlined an ambitious agenda for Dáil Reform to be introduced in a phased process over the lifetime of this Government.

The first phase of Dáil Reforms introduced in the summer of 2011 included:

- Leader's Questions session on Thursdays;
- Topical Issues Debates;
- Friday sittings for TDs to introduce their own Bills ;
- Reduced the number of Oireachtas Committees from 25 to 16.
- Increased the number of sitting days by reducing the length of Dáil recesses.

This phase of the Dáil Reform Programme is designed to implement a set of reforms that will take effect in the upcoming Dáil term, as well as outline additional reforms for the next Dáil under a unicameral structure.

Dáil Reform is an ongoing process and further proposals will be considered for inclusion in the next phase.

Outline of proposed Reforms

More Public Involvement in Law Making

- **Expanding the current Oireachtas Committee Pre-Legislative Stage**
 - The Pre-Legislative stage before the relevant Oireachtas Committee will be required for all non-emergency legislation.

- Where a Minister does not bring a Bill to Committee for Pre-Legislative Stage, they will be required to outline to both the Cabinet and the Dáil the reasons for this decision.
- This will allow for an unprecedented and extensive engagement by the public in law making. The Committee can consult with citizens with expertise in the area, civic society groups and other interested groups – crucially, this will take place before the Legislation is drafted.
- Where there has been Pre-Legislative Stage the Chair or Vice Chair of the Committee will have an equal right to speak as the Minister and the Opposition spokespersons before the Dáil to outline the Committee's work.

Annual outline to Dáil of Government Priorities

- The Government will publish for debate in the Dáil:
 - an economic update and projections for the next three years (using the **Stability Programme and National Reform Programme** that are produced as part of EU-wide economic planning)
 - a new document called the **National Risk Assessment**, which will set out the risks (both financial and non-financial) which the country faces in the year ahead
 - a **National Progress Report**, produced independently by the CSO
- The Taoiseach and Tanaiste will address the Dáil and set out Government priorities.
- Over the course of the week each Minister will address the Dáil setting out their Departments achievements to date and their plans for the future.

Financial Scrutiny

- **Developing the role of Oireachtas Committees in the Budget Process**

- April to September

- In April each year the Stability Programme Update is presented by the Government to the EU. Committees can review this information and report before the Budget in October.
- The Department of Finance and the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council will provide briefing to the Oireachtas Finance Committee before the Budget.

- October to December

- The Budget and Spending Estimates will be published in October.
- The Dáil and Committees will, for the first time, scrutinise the Budget proposals and the Estimates in before the beginning of the financial year, ie before any money is spent
- A new, improved model of financial scrutiny which was piloted for five Departments in 2013 will be rolled out to all Departments by 2015.

New Dáil Schedule

- **Additional time for legislative debate in the standard Dáil week**

- The total sitting time during a standard week will be increased allowing additional time for legislative debate.
- The additional sitting time will be achieved by the Dáil starting earlier on Tuesday (12.30 pm), Wednesday (9.30am) and Thursday (9.30 am).
- Leader's Questions will take place at 3.15pm on Tuesdays and at 12 noon on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

- **Friday Sittings**

- The Dáil will sit every second Friday for four hours.
- This will allow for a two hour debate of a Private Member's Bill, followed by a two hour discussion of Committee Reports. In the event that no Committee Report is available two Bills will be taken on that day.
- As with Private Member's Bills the Committee Reports will be selected using a lottery system.
- As with Private Member's Bills the Minister or Minister of State will speak during the debate to outline the Government's response to the Committee Report.

Topical Issues

- **Availability of Minister**

- The Minister or a Minister of State from the relevant Department will be present in the chamber for a Topical Issue debate.
- Where no Minister from that Department is available, and with the agreement of the Deputy concerned, debate on the topic will be deferred until a Minister from that Department is available when it will be given priority.

- **Multiple proposers for the same Topical Issue**

- The Ceann Comhairle may choose to divide the set time among four or fewer Topical Issues depending on the requests received from Deputies.

Oral PQs

- **Questions in the Chamber**
 - An ordinary oral question will only be answered if the Deputy tabling the Question is in the Chamber when it is reached.
 - The Deputy will be given a brief period to outline the question before the Minister's reply.
 - Opposition spokespersons can ask 5 ordinary Oral Questions in their own name instead of the current 2.
 - Grouping of replies will be notified to members in advance of the start of Question Time.

Legislative Debates in the Chamber

- At First Stage the proposer of a Private Member's Bill will be given a speaking slot of 5 minutes to outline briefly the purpose of the Bill.
- At Second Stage the Chair or Vice Chair of the Committee which considered the Bill at Pre-Legislative Stage shall have a speaking slot to report to the Dáil on its findings. This slot will follow the Minister and Opposition Spokespersons.
- At the end of the second stage debate 45 minutes will be allowed for concluding remarks by Deputies chosen by the Ceann Comhairle who had previously spoken. Up to fifteen speakers can be facilitated as follows:

Opposition spokespersons	Slots 1 - 3
Committee Chair	Slot 4
10 other Members selected by the Ceann Comhairle	Slot 5 - 14
Minister/Minister of State	Slot 15

EU Scrunity

Additional Sitting Weeks on EU Matters

- There will be two sitting weeks a year, in early May and early November, tailored to deal with EU related business.
 - In May the Dáil will focus on a full Government statement on key EU priorities for Ireland, our orientation across each Council formation and progress on Legislation at EU Level, with statements by each Minister.
 - In November each sectoral Committee will look at EU issues relevant to their own area.

Measures to improve the Legislative Process

- A new system for the drafting and enactment of Legislation will include a reduction in the number of Legislative Programmes approved by Cabinet each year from the current three (one each term) to two (each for a six month period). More structured procedures for providing timetables and benchmarks for the drafting and enactment of Bills will also be introduced.
- The new Dáil Schedule will increase the time available to debate legislation in the standard sitting week.
- These steps will result in a reduction in the use of the guillotine in the Dáil.

Post Legislative Review

- A Minister will report to the relevant Oireachtas Select Committee within 12 months of enactment to review the functioning of the Act. This will allow for the Committee to consult with civil society groups and individuals with expertise in the relevant area.

In the Next Dáil under a unicameral system

- A Pre-Enactment Stage will be introduced between Report Stage and Final Stage. This would be undertaken by the Committee which had considered the Bill at Pre-Legislative and Committee Stages and will allow for that Committee to make recommendations to the Dáil for approval. This will take place with all Bills except in the case of emergency legislation.
- A new structure for the Oireachtas Committee System will be established. This enhanced Committee System will have 14 Dáil Committees including:
 - Four strategic committees
 - They will focus on issues of major strategic and political importance (including PAC, Finance & Budget, EU scrutiny and Social Affairs).
 - They will be granted with additional powers to carry out their work such as those currently allowed to PAC.
 - They will take precedence over the sectoral committees.
 - Seven sectoral committees
 - They will shadow Government Departments; and
 - Three thematic committees
 - They would focus on specific issue (Oversight & Petitions, Good Friday Agreement, members' interests).
 - Committees Chairs will be appointed using the d'Hondt system for a proportionate distribution of Committee Chairs between the Government and Opposition.
 - These Committees will have the power to consult civil society groups, advocacy groups and individuals with expertise in a specific area to inform and assist them in their work.